



ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA

POLICY BRIEF

LOGS OR LOCAL LIVELIHOOD? THE CASE FOR LEGALIZING COMMUNITY CONTROL OF FOREST LANDS IN RATANAKIRI, CAMBODIA

A recent eighteen-month economic study of the benefits of alternative uses of forest land in Ratanakiri province recommends the exclusion of customary forest land from current and future commercial concessions.

The study compares the economic benefits of using forest land in Ratanakiri for the traditional collection of non-timber forest products by ethnic communities, with the benefits of commercial timber harvesting.

The main conclusions of the study are that non-timber forest products (NTFP) are worth a lot, much more than previously thought. These products are very important to the poorest sectors of society. Any land use planning process that ignores these values can lead to a loss of economic value for Cambodia and even to increased security problems and conflicts in the province.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence that local communities have the capability and knowledge to sustainably manage their customary forests themselves. Conversely, large scale commercial interests in the area currently threaten the environmental stability and rich cultural heritage of the area.

The study was undertaken by the Ministry of Environment (MOE) with support from consultant Camille Bann and financing from EEPSEA. It involved detailed socio-economic survey work in a number of remote villages; a forest inventory and the interpretation of aerial photography; analysis using a 'Total Economic Value' approach; and, a series of training workshops and consultations in Phnom Penh and Ratanakiri.

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The study site, Tapean forest, covers 1824 hectares and is located in Poey Commune, O Chum District, Ratanakiri Province. The area is currently under concession to Macro Panin, an Indonesian logging company. However, it is used extensively for traditional purposes by at least five villages; acts as an important watershed; is a prime location for malva nuts (an important source of income for villagers); has ecotourism potential; and contains trees of commercial value. Recently, a local Forest Conservation Association was established by six villages in the commune, to manage and protect Tapean forest and three other connected forest areas. This initiative is being supported by OXFAM UKI/NOVIB NTFP study.

A forest inventory of half a hectare of land in Tapean forest reveals the area's rich diversity and value. The area contains close to 200 tree species and over 300 species of ground flora and saplings. 100 types of trees, and 200 species of ground flora and saplings are used by villagers for a range of traditional purposes.

Over 40 households were surveyed in four villages known to use Tapean forest in order to assess the value of the forest for traditional purposes. The study focused on the valuation of NTFP, namely fuelwood, rattan, bamboo, malva nuts, construction materials and wildlife.

NTFP are often assumed to be of low or even zero value. The study shows this to be wrong. In Tapean forest, forest products have a value that may be as high as US\$3,922 per hectare of forest. If this forest were to be harvested for timber, it would have a value less than this; no more than US\$ 1,697 per hectare (present value over 90 years). When one considers the other environmental functions that would be lost from timber harvesting - such as the loss of watershed functions and biodiversity benefits - then the net benefits from harvesting timber are diminished further. In short, NTFP values are an important part of the economy, more important than expected logging benefits in certain cases.

Furthermore, the rich cultural heritage of the many ethnic minorities of Ratanakiri, of importance to the whole of Cambodia, is intricately based on the forest. The forest must remain intact if these unique values are not to be lost.

Detailed surveys in the region demonstrate that NTFPs are a critically important source of subsistence. All households in the sample rely on such products as a source of fuelwood, foods and materials for house construction. Moreover, only 30% of households in the region have a family member engaged in the wage economy. Forest products therefore provide an important natural mechanism for alleviating poverty without explicit government investment. Loss of the forest may result in a loss of this 'natural subsidy'.



The results show that land use allocation decisions are currently being made to the detriment of indigenous people. Although forest products are worth a large amount, recent cash compensation levels are less than 1% of the value of NTFP. Compensation has typically been of the order of US\$36 per hectare, while the value of the NTFP approaches US\$4,000 per hectare. This inequity arises primarily because of the weak bargaining position of indigenous people, which is exacerbated by their economic vulnerability. Elsewhere in the world, such continued exploitation has often resulted in security problems, particularly when coupled with a loss of forests.

NTFP form a significant part of the economy of Ratanakiri. This study shows, even without fully accounting for the environmental functions of the forest and the rich cultural heritage of the area, the economic value of sustainable harvesting of NTFP in Tapean forest to be higher than the value of commercial logging.

It is therefore recommended that all customary forest areas in Ratanakiri be excluded from current and future commercial concessions in the province. These customary forests should be legally recognised as being under the management and control of the local communities. All current commercial activities in the province should be immediately frozen for a period sufficient to effect this revision.

As the first step in this process, legal status and support should be given to the newly formed Forest Conservation Association in Poey Commune. The 4,500 hectares of customary forest under the Association should be legally recognised as under the management and control of the Forest Conservation Association. This would set a precedent for granting legal status to other customary forest lands throughout the province.

Further to this, a committee should be set up to look in more detail at land-use planning issues (including customary forest use, traditional agriculture, and commercial activities), to come up with a more comprehensive and balanced land use plan for recommendation. Consultation with, and involvement of, local people should be emphasised throughout this planning process.

A more in-depth study of the potential market for malva nuts, techniques for harvesting the nut and possible marketing mechanisms might also be undertaken. Increased marketing of this commercially promising nut should be preceded by a period of local capacity building, to facilitate local community management and control of the malva nut resource, and to ensure that the benefits from harvesting the nut remain largely within the local community.

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The full text of this study is available as an EEPSEA Research Report.